

WE CLAIM:

1. A process for packaging a food item formed into a soft mass wherein the food item is wrapped in individual slices comprising:

folding a continuous web of heat-sealable thermoplastic material into V-folded condition including a folded longitudinal first side and an open longitudinal second side, the web on one side of the V-fold defining a front sheet and the web on the other side of the V-fold defining a rear sheet;

continuously moving the web in a forward direction; forming a longitudinal hermetic seal along the open longitudinal side of the web in V-folded condition to define a continuous tubular web, the longitudinal hermetic seal being formed in a continuous manner as the web is continuously moved forward;

inserting the soft mass food item into the tubular web;

after the food item is inserted, flattening the web to form a continuous slice of the food item disposed between front sheet and the rear sheet of the web;

forming a plurality of hermetically sealed cross-seals extending from the first longitudinal side to the second longitudinal side of the web at predetermined intervals in the flattened web while the web is continuously moved forward, whereby hermetically sealed slices of the food item are defined.

2. The process of claim 1 wherein the food item comprises cheese.

3. A process for packaging a food item wherein the food item is wrapped in individual slices by inserting the food item into a continuous plastic web, comprising:

forming a food item into a soft mass;

providing a web of thermoplastic material, the thermoplastic material comprising an outer layer and an inner sealing layer;

arranging the web of thermoplastic material to have a front sheet and a rear sheet in V-folded condition, wherein said front and rear sheets each comprise said outer layer and said inner sealing layer, and wherein the web in V-folded condition having a folded longitudinal first edge and an open longitudinal second edge;

moving the web continuously in a forward direction; conveying the web in V-folded condition to a longitudinal sealing station;

forming a longitudinal hermetic seal along the longitudinal second edge of the web, the longitudinal hermetic seal being formed between the inner sealing layer on the front sheet of the web and the inner sealing layer on the rear sheet so as to form a tubular web of plastic;

inserting the soft mass food item into the tubular web of plastic;

moving the web continuously in a forward direction; continuously flattening the web with the inserted food item such that a continuous slice of the food item is formed between top and bottom layers of the plastic web;

after the web has been flattened, urging the front and rear sheets of the web into intimate contact with each other at a plurality of cross-sealing zones between the first and second longitudinal edges of the web while the web is continuously moved forward;

applying heat to the cross-sealing zones; and the front and rear sheets of the web being urged together at a sufficient pressure to maintain intimate contact between the front and rear sheets of the web so as to remove substantially all of the food item therebetween and the heat being applied at a sufficient temperature and for a sufficient length of time to form a her-

metic heat seal between the sealing layers of the front and rear sheets of the thermoplastic material, whereby slices of the food item are defined between adjacent contacting zones of the web.

4. The process of claim 3 wherein the food item comprises cheese.

5. In an apparatus for packaging a food item wherein the food item is wrapped in individual slices comprising:

means for forming the food item into a soft mass;
means for folding a continuous web of thermoplastic material into V-fold condition including a front sheet and a rear sheet joined by a fold at a bottom longitudinal edge and an open top longitudinal edge, the front sheet and the rear sheet each comprising an outer layer and an inner sealing layer;

a longitudinal sealing station including means for positioning the front sheet and the rear sheet such that, at the open top longitudinal edge of the web, the inner sealing layer of the front sheet faces the inner sealing layer of the rear sheet, and means for continuously forming a hermetic seal near the top longitudinal side of the web between the sealing layers of the front and rear sheets of the web as the web is continuously moved;

means for inserting the food item into a continuous tubular web of plastic material;

means for continuously flattening the web with the inserted food item inside the web such that a continuous slice of the food item is defined between the front sheet and the rear sheet of the tubular web;

a cross sealing station disposed downstream of the longitudinal sealing station including means for continuously forming hermetically sealed cross-seals extending from a longitudinal bottom side to a longitudinal top

side of the web at predetermined intervals in the web as the web is continuously moved, the cross-seals hermetically sealing the sealing layer of the front and rear sheets together; and

means for continuously conveying the web to the longitudinal and cross-sealing stations.

6. The apparatus of claim 5 wherein the means for forming the food item into a soft mass comprises means for forming cheese into a soft mass.

7. A packaged food item comprising:
a thin slice of cheese formed from a soft mass of cheese; and

a wrapping comprising a thermoplastic film, said film including an outer high density polyethylene layer and an inner sealant layer, said wrapping folded on one side to define a front sheet and a rear sheet which envelope the slice of cheese and the front and rear sheets being hermetically sealed together on the remaining sides, the hermetic seal on the remaining sealed sides formed between the sealant layer on the front sheet and the sealant layer on the rear sheet.

8. A packaged food item comprising:
a sheet of material which is folded upon itself at a plurality of contact zones so as to form an envelope having an exterior surface, wherein said exterior surface defines an interior volume of space;
said exterior surface comprising a plurality of sealing zones to hermetically isolate the interior volume of space from other spaces; and

a food item which is contained in said interior volume of space and defined by the contact zones so as to completely occupy said interior volume of space.

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9: The packaged food item of claim 8 wherein said food item is cheese.

In 1
as a separate page